

CHAPTER IX

FOOD AND ITS PREPARATION

262 The dietary of the Karen includes almost everything edible in the way of vegetables that grow in their country. A great variety of fish, birds, and animals are also partaken of; but it should be said at once that three-fourths, if not seven-eighths, of the amount of food they consume is rice, of which they raise many varieties. Next to rice they resort in time of need to millet, maize, and roots, especially yams of different kinds. Besides gourds, squashes, eggplant, roselle, sweet potatoes, and the edible fruits, the Karen eat the tender shoots of many plants and trees, including the bamboo.

All kinds of fish and eels, some varieties of crabs, snakes, locusts, and grasshoppers, snails and other mollusks, and even certain varieties of ants are comprised in the menu. Flesh of all sorts from that of the elephant to that of the rat is eaten with relish.¹ In the realm of feathered creatures the variety is equally comprehensive, ranging from the sparrow to the peacock, not even omitting the crow. Fish-paste, called in Karen "nya u"² but commonly given its Burmese name of "ngape," is greatly prized by the Karen, who think that it adds a very savory flavor to their food. On the plains they buy it from the Burmans from whom, it may be, they have adopted its use, but sometimes those living near streams or lakes make it for themselves.

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Notwithstanding their inclusive diet, the Karen have no idea of what we call a balanced ration and, after all, are more or less undernourished. They also practice constantly the habit of betel chewing, which benumbs their sense of taste. For these reasons they crave highly seasoned foods. Chillies or red peppers are considered a necessity, while meats and powdered condiments of spices, tumeric, and chillies are used only to make the pungent curry sauce with which the cooked rice is flavored. Salt, which is obtained at the bazaars, is also used in seasoning.

¹ Messrs. Hume and MacDougal speak of some writer, whose name they do not give, as conveying the impression that the Karen do not eat the flesh of animals belonging to the rat tribe. I have not found this to be true. (Vide Hume and MacDougal, *Pagan Tribes of Burma*, Vol. II, 239).

² This word means literally "rotten fish."

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a fishing or hunting expedition, however, or when some feast is held, the people gorge themselves with as many kinds of meat or fish as they can obtain. Larger fish and the flesh of animals are cut up and cleaned before cooking. No part of an animal is wasted. The intestines, when properly cleansed and prepared, are considered especially toothsome. The best-liked meats are pork and venison. Birds, pigeons, and ducks are also regarded as good eating. Small birds are often cooked without other preliminaries than a hasty

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THE FIREPLACE IN A KAREN HOUSE

The housewife is watching the pot boil. Signs of approaching civilization are apparent, such as the enamel plate and the horseshoe on the

plucking of the feathers. Meats are ordinarily cooked with the oil pressed from sesame seeds and flavored with condiments more or less in the manner of Indian curries. For this purpose a larger or smaller quantity of the following spices are used: tumeric, ginger, cloves, cardamon seeds, and cinnamon bark, besides tamarind, lime-juice, and the inevitable salt and chili. Fishermen and hunters like to roast small game, fish, or strips of meat from larger animals between splints of bamboo hung near or over a camp fire. The Polynesian way of baking such foods is often employed, the fish, flesh, or fowl being wrapped in plantain leaves and buried in a pit, which is lined with stones made hot by having had a roaring fire

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